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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 JEDDAH 000300

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TAGS: [CVIS](#) [ECON](#) [ENIV](#) [KPAO](#) [OEXC](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [SOCI](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI SUMMER CAPITAL OF TAIF EAGER TO ENGAGE

REF: JEDDAH 225

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In meetings with Charge on August 8, the Governor and Mayor of Taif and the President of Taif University (the site of recent protests by rejected female applicants) invited U.S. participation and investment in their ambitious plans to develop tourism, technology, manufacturing, and education in the former summer capital of Saudi Arabia. The Governor commented that security is excellent in Taif although illegal immigrants are a problem. Saudi interlocutors welcomed the move to 5-year visas but expressed frustration with impediments to traveling to the United States. End summary.

Seeking U.S. investment in developing Taif

¶2. (SBU) In August 8 meetings with Charge (Ambassador Erdman), Consul General, Poloff, PDoff and USCSoft, political and academic leaders in the mountain city of Taif (pop. 1,350,000) two hours east of Jeddah, outlined ambitious plans to expand tourism, manufacturing, and education in the former summer capital of Saudi kings. Governor Fahad Abdulaziz Al Moaamer, a graduate of Whittier University (CA), quoting Mecca Governor Prince Khalid Al Faisal, said "We want to be in the first world, not in the back." To attract business, the government is distributing land in Taif to investors -- both Saudi and Saudi-foreign joint ventures -- through its Tourism Board and upgrading its infrastructure. A spectacular new road to Jeddah opened in July 2009, and there are plans to build a new international airport and medical facility. While acknowledging a current deficit in water supplies, the Governor said a new desalination plant (120,000 liters per day) will come on line in five months and is expected to meet water needs for the next several years. Taif Mayor Mohammed Abdulaziz Al-Mokharrij commented that the influx of migrants from villages is placing great strain on water supplies and agreed with Charge that heavy subsidization of water and electricity prices encourages unnecessary consumption.

¶3. (SBU) Inviting U.S. investment in Taif, the Governor declared, "We need everything" -- especially modern techniques and technology, computers, and equipment.

Noting Taif's role as a center for fruit production, Charge recalled his experience as ambassador in Algeria, where strawberry production and quality had been significantly increased by using U.S. seeds, and offered to put local authorities in touch with California-based firms who were leaders in agro-industry. Mokharrij, an impressive University of Arizona graduate with an advanced degree from Harvard in urban planning and land-use, emphasized his interest in protecting the environment by developing light industry, tourism, and medical services, rather than opting for heavy industry. Agriculture, historically Taif's main industry, has been harsh on the environment, depleting the city's aquifers. Governor and Mayor expressed eagerness to expand tourism in Taif, a popular summer destination because of the cooler temperatures (10-15 degrees F lower than Jeddah) due to the high elevation (5,600 ft), encouraged U.S. investment in this area, and hoped U.S. organizations such as the Smithsonian would bring tour groups to Taif so that visitors can see how Saudi Arabia has been developed. Charge suggested that, realistically, they should be looking at boutique tourism. Subsequent discussion with tourism sector officials indicated that response to the region's ambitious plans to attract tourism investment has been minimal, in part because it is such a seasonal industry.

Infrastructure protection and terrorist rehab

14. (SBU) Charge noted U.S.-Saudi cooperation on critical infrastructure protection in the Kingdom

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and asked if there are infrastructure facilities in Taif that will be involved in this program. The Governor responded that the most important facility was Taif airport, which was also the location of one of the country's most important air bases. There are also schools for military families and munition storage facilities, he said, hastening to note that so far there have been no major security issues in Taif. Security, in fact, is excellent in Taif and conditions have improved as Saudis have become more knowledgeable and moved "from darkness into light." In this regard, he said the Saudi rehabilitation program has "successfully re-educated" many home-grown terrorist detainees.

Illegal workers cause strain

15. (SBU) Taif officials are eager to locate and provide jobs for the city's youth population. The Governor conceded that Taif's young people are moving to larger cities because local employment opportunities are limited to tourism, farming, and small factories. While most employees at local businesses are Saudi, technicians and engineers tend to come from outside the Kingdom. At the same time as Taif's young people are moving to Jeddah, Mecca, and Riyadh to study and work, illegal migrant workers from Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia -- including many Hajj and Umrah overstayers -- are finding their way through the mountains to Taif in search of work. Al Moaamer added that some of these migrants die in the mountains en route while others are detained and deported. Considering the 900-1,000 kilometers separating Taif from Yemen, the Governor did not see Yemeni migrants as a major problem, especially since Taif's tribes are culturally different from the

Saudi tribes in the Asir region.

Taif University -- Inability to accommodate demand led to recent protests by women

6.(SBU) With recent disturbances over admissions decisions at Taif University in mind, Charge asked the Governor whether there is greater demand than available places at the university. The Governor uneasily acknowledged there is a shortage of spaces but declined to elaborate. (Note: The rare, early August demonstrations at the university were by Saudi women protesting the turning away of female applicants on university admissions day. Abaya-clad demonstrators, clashing with female security guards, alleged corruption in the admissions process, claiming that the administration admitted fewer qualified applicants and closed admissions before the official registration date.) Officials indicated only one third of Taif University's 32,000 students are female, compared to about 58 percent kingdom-wide, a disparity the Governor attributed to the fact that most Saudi women choose to study at Mecca's nearby Umm Al Qura University.

University's expanding role and operations

17. (SBU) Officials explained that as part of the city's development plan, Taif University is building a new facility to house 75,000-80,000 students and to expand from 17 to 37 colleges (departments or "faculties"). To cope with the rapid expansion, the university hires foreign professors and actively recruits Saudis with doctorates by offering competitive compensation packages and incentives for living in the provincial environment of Taif. The university currently employs 15 American professors, most of whom are Arabic speakers -- 10 in the Computer Science department alone. The Rector and his senior staff, all U.S., Canadian, or UK educated, expressed eagerness

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to develop links to U.S. universities in the fields of science, technology, and medicine -- the disciplines most desired by students due to better job prospects after graduation. (In this regard, the Rector acknowledged that many students have difficulties finding jobs following graduation.) Social sciences, politics and humanities are regarded as more "sensitive" areas, with correspondingly less attention paid to their development.

18. (SBU) The Rector and his senior staff said Taif University has signed cooperation agreements with several U.S. institutions, including Wayne State University, University of Florida, and Minnesota State University. University President Abdulelah Banaja expressed interest in programs by the Consulate visa officer and education advisor to present opportunities for study in the U.S. and indicated that he would consider Fulbright, academic specialist, English teaching and other exchanges. Banaja said that almost 250 Taif University graduates went to the United States, Britain, Canada or Australia for post-graduate studies during the past year. The head of the Computer Science department, recently returned after 18 years in the U.S.. In recent years, noted the U.K.-educated Rector, many Saudi students began applying to UK universities because the application, admission, and visa processes are so much simpler and easier than for study at American universities. This was unfortunate, in his and his colleagues' view, because they regard the U.S. education system as superior and want the university's staff to be U.S.-educated and able to apply U.S. teaching techniques, methods, and philosophies

to Taif University.

¶9. (SBU) With critiques of the Saudi education system as being too focused on Arabic and Islamic studies at the expense of hard sciences, Charge asked if incoming students in the science and technology areas are sufficiently prepared.

The Rector and his senior staff said entering students in the areas of science and medicine are generally not well prepared in these areas. For this reason, a required foundation year of math, science, and technology courses has been incorporated into the curriculum. Asked if there are obligatory religion courses for students, the Rector said all students study Shariah for two of the eight mandatory class hours each year. According to one dean, the university plans to offer a non-Shariah legal degree as an alternative to the Shariah law program. The university has approximately 200 full-time Shariah law students.

Continuing complaints about U.S. visas and airport inspections

¶10. (SBU) Several interlocutors complained about the difficulty of getting visas to the U.S. and their treatment at U.S. airports. "We used to travel to the United States just like we were Americans," lamented the Governor, last in the U.S. eight years ago, but "then (post 9/11) we couldn't go after that." Charge acknowledged there had been serious problems and that some problems remain, but said we are actively addressing them. In the meantime, the situation has substantially improved, with 50 percent of visa applications for Saudi citizens approved in less than one week and 82 percent approved in a month or less. The move to 5-year validity for visas is also a major improvement, to which the professors readily agreed. While we try to give priority to students, so they don't miss the beginning of the academic year, Charged urged that Saudis intending to travel to the United States should apply for appointments as early as possible. At lunch, a U.S.-educated administrator recounted that when his two sons

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traveled to the U.S. to attend university, his American-born son entered without delay while the Saudi-born son was detained at Washington Dulles Airport for six hours, missing his connecting flight. Other university faculty members expressed worry about Saudis "always being required to spend hours at the airport filling out forms and submitting to questioning."

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Taif officials welcome cooperation with U.S. businesses and academic institutions in the sectors targeted for development -- tourism, technology, manufacturing, education.

Some areas remain off-limits, however, such as the social sciences at the university. Their stated enthusiasm may have been driven in part by the support of Mecca Region Governor Khalid Al Faisal for the American-Saudi Arabian Culture & Commerce Festival

in Taif
in May 2009 (reftel). Post's Taif visit underscored the
importance
of educating Arab students in the United States, since the
Saudis
most conspicuously eager to work and cooperate with us were
all
products of North American universities. End comment.

11. (U) Ambassador Erdman has cleared this message.
QUINN